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'I'm the President'

By William Safire

WASHINGTON, June 28—"I'm the President," Mr. Carter felt it necessary to say in his latest press conference; "I make the decisions."

This plaintive note came in response to a growing feeling in the nation that the man who occupies the Oval Office does not occupy the Presidency. Never in our history has a split between the State Department and the National Security Council been so profound, and the President's natural inclination to paper over the difference has led him into hard-line speeches one week and soft-line press conferences the next.

Even more disturbing than this wide-swinging vacillation is the evidence from the press conference that the President is unaware of what is going on in his Administration on the most sensitive foreign affairs matters.

For example, members of Mr. Brzezinski's N.S.C. staff have been questioning the approval of the sale of advanced-technology oil-drilling equipment to the Soviet Union. "If they want us to bail them out of their energy problem," one hard-liner told Richard Burt of The New York Times, "we should force them to pay a price."

The "price" would be linked to the willingness of the Soviets to curb their takeover of Africa — if we see no restraint there from them, then they'll get no high-quality drill bits produced by Dresser Industries of Texas from us. This tit-for-tat pressure, which is the only language tough-minded Soviets understand, is viewed with shock and horror by Cy Vance's State Department.

When asked about this suggestion, widely known in Washington, to tie our technology sales to Soviet conduct, Mr. Carter drew a blank. "I've not heard that proposal you describe," he told the incredulous reporters. He then enunciated a policy which, if true, is an indictment of his competence as a negotiator: "We've never held out the prospect of increased or decreased trade if they did or did not do a certain thing that we thought was best."

With his own N.S.C. actively proposing such long-overdue pressure — both within the Administration and to reporters — the President of the United States professes that he has "not heard that proposal." Hard to believe.

The second example, even more startling, has to do with a visit to Capitol Hill made by Stansfield Turner, Director of Central Intelligence, last

by Martin Schramm of Newsday was: "The C.I.A. Director, Mr. Turner, present a document, a written plan to Senator Clark... the plan called for sending arms to a third country, to the rebel forces in Angola. Did you know about the meeting? Did you know about that document? And since others around the Administration did, would you have approved it?"

In the grand tradition of President Warren Gamaliel Harding, Mr. Carter replied, "I didn't have any idea that the C.I.A. Director had even talked to Senator Clark about it."

Let that sink in: Here is the President's covert operations chief going to the super-dove Senator whose amendment hamstringing our ability to counter Soviet-Cuban aggression in Africa, presenting the Senator with a plan to send in arms through a third country — and the President tells us, "I had no

ESSAY

knowledge of that nor have I even intended to send weapons to Angola directly or indirectly."

The truth is that the Special Coordination Committee (Brzezinski, Vance, Brown, Turner) met on April 7 to see what could be done in Angola; two weeks later, Admiral Turner was told to approach Senator Clark. The C.I.A. chief took a one-page, 12-sentence proposal with him. The Senator tells me he assumed at the time that the President had been aware of the proposal.

Believe it or not, President Carter now insists he read about this plan in the newspapers, with absolutely no foreknowledge, and assumed — after the fact — that his Director of Central Intelligence was just trying to find out the meaning of the Clark amendment.

Then what was Stansfield Turner doing, with written indirect-aid plans in hand, in Senator Clark's office? Playing rogue elephant? Or did the President's top four advisers, who okayed the presentation of the plan to the Senator, think that keeping the President in the dark would give Mr. Carter the opportunity for what used to be called "plausible denial"? 1978

In both the technology linkage and the indirect-aid proposal, either President Carter is not telling the truth about being totally unaware of these two hawkish plans, or he really does not know what is going on in the White House. When he claims he "never contemplated" indirect aid to opponents of Moscow's Angola puppet — despite proof that such a plan was presented in his name to a key senator by his top aides — then he is either devious or dangerously uninformed.

That is why he has to assure us, "I'm the President, I make the decisions..." In fact, he is repeating that to himself, every time he changes his mind, and even Jimmy Carter must be having his doubts about his ability to

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